

Observations from travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan

With crew rest stops in Romania and Tunisia

January 27, 2010 to February 2, 2010

By U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis (R-SC4)

In Romania we found. . .

- That the people of Romania are particularly friendly toward the United States
- That they are grateful for our support after their overthrow of the brutal Ceausescu dictatorship in 1989. We stayed near the square where Ceausescu gave his last speech, hours before he and his wife were put to death by firing squad.
- That Romania has developed significant technological proficiencies and enjoys very high penetration of high-speed internet access.
- That the internet access has created an opportunity for cybercrime, much of which is aimed at scamming American consumers.
- That Romanian central bankers are our allies in on-going efforts to interdict terrorist financing.

In Pakistan we found. . .

- The “A” team of American diplomats and defense representatives serving in a very dangerous place. Our Ambassador, Anne Patterson, is particularly impressive in her command of the facts and her ability to offer incisive analysis.
- That many high-value Afghan Taliban targets have taken refuge in Pakistan
- Those targets need to be destroyed if possible and, if not, at least put on the run so as to disrupt their plotting.
- That secret, in-country briefings are much more informative than the ones we receive in Washington.
- A reminder of the gift our military gives each day in their subjection to civilian control. The head of Pakistan’s defense forces, General Kayani, told us that it’s Pakistan’s war against the extremists; it’s not that they are just supporting our war against extremists. He also told us that, “Democracy is the way forward; we know that.” He added that, “It’s the fundamentals that matter.” How we wish that one of those fundamentals were civilian control of Pakistan’s military and that he were the last in the line of commanding generals who had lived in compliance with that fundamental.

In Afghanistan we found. . .

- An incredibly prepared U.S. Ambassador in Karl Eikenberry. Prior to becoming U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, General Eikenberry served two tours of duty in Afghanistan and retired from the U.S. Army in order to become our Ambassador.
- A devoted team of civil servants (State Department, FBI, DEA, Agriculture, USAID and others) and private groups (like Cure International) ready to help build a free Afghanistan
- The need to recognize the point at which defense of America’s national security interest (in destroying terrorists networks and bringing governance to what would otherwise be terrorists’ safe havens) trips over into full out nation-building.

- The need to avoid the naïve assumption that other cultures want to adopt our culture and governing systems. I became concerned in a briefing in which a very eager State Department employee described the hope of bringing judicial systems and the rule of law to tribal areas in Afghanistan. As to that effort to bring courts and the rule of law to remote villages, I'm told that Afghanistan's President, Hamid Karzai, once quoted a Pashtun saying which is roughly translated, "I invited you into my living room, but you came into my bedroom." My conclusion: let's avoid going into people's bedrooms. Let's be careful to focus on the American national security interest, asking Americans service men and women to die only for America and not for some other country. At times and in service to our security interests we will need to risk blood and spend treasure to build governing structures as we are doing now in Afghanistan, but let's not trip over into the folly of nation-building. Great Britain tried it, and their empire collapsed. As then-governor George W. Bush said in the 2000 presidential election, we need a "more humble foreign policy."

In our military we found, again and again. . .

- Strength in leaders serving within structures of respect
- The model of serving rather than being served
- An understanding that strength is not in the sanctimony of any one soldier. I have yet to meet one soldier who, when complimented on his or her service, has said anything other than, "I'm just doing my job, sir."
- It's each one doing his job, knowing what needs to be done, not trying to take the place of another but being ready to assume command if one above him goes down. There was an awesome example of this in our Styker-ride to the Afghanistan/Pakistan border crossing at Spin-Boldak, Afghanistan/Chaman, Pakistan--a general officer, other officers and enlisted soldiers all trusting each other to do their jobs. As I walked along with the general toward a crowd of Afghans and Pakistanis in motion, the lieutenant was calling out orders for his men to cover on this side or that side. As he did so, the soldiers under his command responded without hesitation. I turned to the general and remarked about the responsiveness of the chain of command and the impressive capabilities of the lieutenant and his soldiers. "Thanks for noticing what they're doing," he said to me. "We train them to make decisions, and they make them." Later I told the lieutenant that we had been talking about him: "Just doing my job, sir."
- That the hardest thing was leaving them. In every visit with our forces deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, I've found that the hardest part is leaving. While there, there's a sense of mission and purpose, of service to a higher cause, of willing submission. America's best voluntarily sacrifice comfort and convenience, connections with their loved ones and, if necessary, their own lives. When it comes time to leave them, there's a desire to stay, to trade places or to travel back in time and serve with them. I wanted the lieutenant to get on the Blackhawk to go back to Kandahar, to Kabul to America, to his bride of less than a year. Having lived much longer, it seemed that I should take his place. Later, I mentioned this thought to one of our young officer escorts. He told me that he's had the same conversation with his dad, and that he's told his dad "No, sir. It's our turn. It's our time to serve."

In Tunisia we found. . .

- A secular Islamic society that values education (literacy rate of over 74% compared to 28% in Afghanistan)
- A diversified economy that with manufacturing and a prospering middle income population
- A North African state that, unlike its neighbor Libya, doesn't struggle with the curse of oil wealth that feeds but doesn't develop a populace
- A fairly benevolent dictatorship (only two presidents since independence from France in 1956) which emphasizes education and economic development, which allows women to participate in civic life and which censors the internet (in part to keep radical Islam in check)
- The final resting place of 2,841 Americans killed in World War II and the place of memorial for 3,724 Americans listed on the World War II "Wall of the Missing." This 27 acres is the extent of America's World War II conquest in Africa, a gift of the people of Tunisia.

Points of application for those in leadership. . .

- It's about serving, not about being served
- It's about growing big ideas rather than stoking irrational fears
- It's about building solid supply lines of solutions rather than scoring quick points of rhetoric
- It's about digging down to rock solid principles rather than throwing around some sand on the surface
- It's about leading with moral authority rather than moral superiority.
- Leaders should humbly confess that they are not the embodiment of righteousness, but the recipients of grace. By dispensing principles of grace they do their part to bring order out of chaos.

Points of application for me as a member of Congress. . .

- Do your job.
- Seek solutions, not scapegoats.
- Get this government back in its constitutional structure (serve in that "structure of respect")
- Make the hard decisions.
- Dig down to rock and build policies and programs that understand human nature, the importance of hard work and the power of freedom.
- Don't promise the moon and then fail to deliver.

It's a complex and changing world, but there are some profoundly simple truths:

- "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:32.
- "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."